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FIRST POSITIVE BREEDING RECORD OF
ACROCEPHALUS ARUNDINACEUS
EURASIAN GREAT REED WARBLER FOR IRAQ

P. V. GEORGE KAINADY

Natural History Museum, University of Basrah, Basrah, Iraq

During a field trip on 17 June 1968 the calls of Great Reed Warblers attracted my attention. The calls were coming from a small reed-bed (20x6 m) growing in the borrow-pit of a canal, near Tharmiya about 60 km north of Baghdad in Baghdad - Mosul road. The reeds consisted predominantly of **Phragmites communis** with a few **Typha angustifolia** 3 to 3.5 m high were growing in 1 to 1.5 m deep water . Since it was a rather late date for the migrants, I decided to examine the area for possible breeding of the birds. A close search of the reed-bed by wading through unpleasant mud and water revealed three nests.

All the three nests were attached to **P. communis** stems. For support of nest three to five reeds were put into use. One nest was empty, the second contained three nestlings and one intact egg. The nestlings had just started unsheathing their wing feathers, and each had at the broader base of the tongue two black markings which were conspicuous in the orange-yellow mouth cavity. The third nest held four eggs. One of the parents of the latter nest was netted by fixing a mist-net 1.5 m close to the nest.

The bird weighed 22 g and measured: wing 91, tail 72, bill (from feathers) 15, (from skull) 23, tarsus 28; the third primary the longest, the second primary in between third and fourth primaries. It is identified as **Acrocephalus arundinaceus** (Linnaeus) the Eurasian Great Reed Warbler. For lack of any comparative material no subspecific identification is attempted. However, it is not **A. arundinaceus griseldis** (Hartlaub) the Babylonian Great Reed Warbler, which is of a smaller size (wing 76-83, tail 59-68, tarsus 24-26 (Williamson 1963) , known to breed between Baghdad and Basrah. The specimen is deposited in the Bird Collection of the Iraq Natural History Museum.

In the first week of July 1972 I revisited the area and inspected the reed-bed. Three empty nests were found (Fig. 1). No birds were seen or heard. As was the case in 1968 all the three nests were looped round **P. communis** reed stems. The canal passes through a semidesert, where salt resistant thorny plants were growing. Although the reeds are usually cut in Oct./Nov. by farmers, by next Mar./Apr. the reeds are back again to their full height.

Basing on the sex organs 'enlarged to breeding size' of an **A. arundinaceus** collected by Cheesman on June 1, (which was singing there for a fortnight) from a fruit garden near Baghdad where 'there were no reeds or water in the vicinity' , Ticehurst **et al.** (1926) concluded that 'there can be little doubt' about its breeding in Iraq. They noted that the specimen was closer to **A. a. arundinaceus** than to **A. a. zarudnyi** Hartert. Allouse (1953) quoting the foregoing reference says that both the above subspecies as breeding in Iraq, and also states of Steward coming across 'one nest and eggs near Hindiya Barrage in May, 1949' .

On **A. arundinaceus** Chapman and McGeoeh (1956) records : 'At Habbaniya counted eight at a small reed-bed in the middle of May, and heard much song; birds were still present and in song in the middle of July, and may have bred there.' Moore and Boswell (1956) cites the PNC records of one singing on 13 May 1945 in Baghdad area as supporting the view of its breeding. Later Allouse (1962) reports that two subspecies namely **zarudnyi** and **griseldis** as breeding in Iraq, quoting the above references.

The only definite record of **A. arundinaceus** **(griseldis** excluded) breeding in Iraq rests on the report of Allouse (1953) of Steward's finding of nest and eggs near Hindiya Barrage.

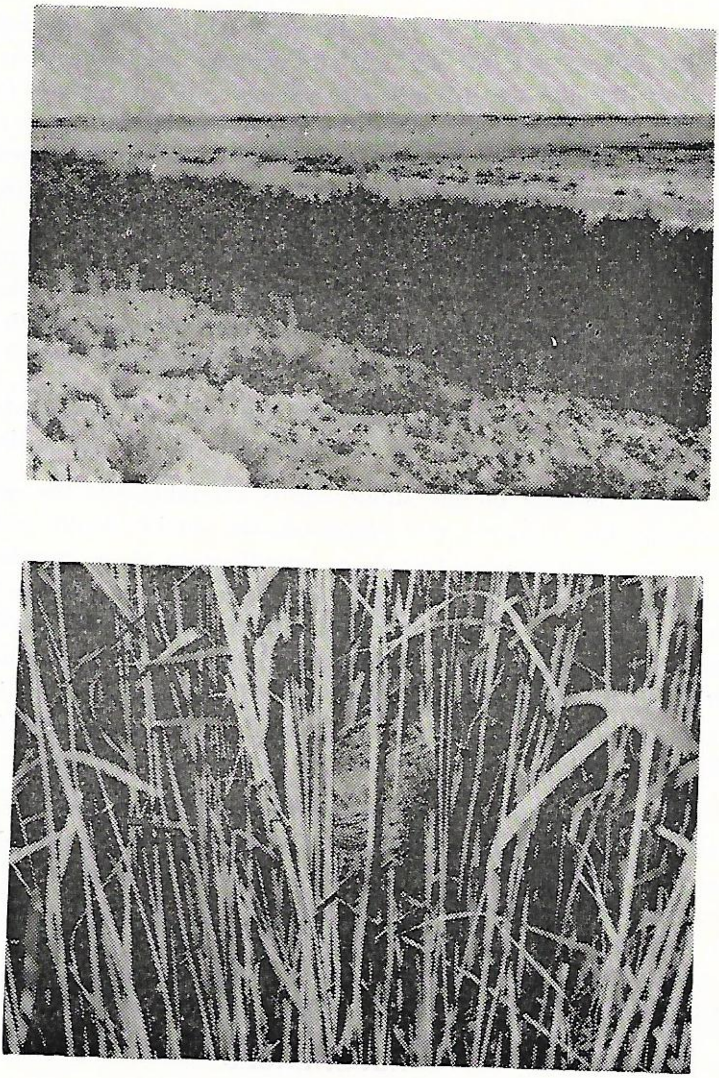

Fig. 1. (Upper) Breeding habitat of **Acrocephalus arundinaceus,** (lower) its nest slung on reed stems, July 1972, Baghdad, Iraq. (George Kainady)

Capt. Mc Neile (per. comm.) who found this Hindiya nest first, tells me that he was guided to the nest by the song of the Great Reed Warbler which sounded 'to be weaker and less harsh' than that of the European form. Steward and Mc Neile neither could collect nor see the owner of the nest, which was very secretive. The nest was found on 3 June 1949 (not in May as given by Allouse 1953 & 1962), and it contained only one egg, which looked 'like those of **A. a. arundinaceus'**, and the egg was collected by Steward. The nest was 'in a reed-bed along-side the road a short distance south-east of Hilla'. It was slung on tall reeds growing in deep water. It was 'a large nest with an outside depth of not less than 15 or 16 cm' , which makes it unlikely of **A. a. griseldis** for whose nest has an outside depth of only 7.6 to 8.8 cm (Ticehurst **et al.** 1922).

The dealer, who bought Steward's egg collection was contacted by Mc Neile, informs that he can find no trace or record of this single egg.

Since no data on the single egg is available and the egg is not traceable, the evidence rests only on the outside depth of the nest. Under the circumstances that **A. a. arundinaceus, A. a. zarudnyi,** and **A. a. griseldis** are the only three subspecies of Great Reed Warblers recorded for Iraq, it is very probable that the Hilla nest belonged either to **arundinaceus** or to **zarudnyi.** However, it may be noted that although **A. stentoreus** (Hemprich & Ehrenberg) the Indian Great Reed Warbler is not recorded for Iraq, close to Iraq in Iran it breeds, which has a nest more or less of the same outside depth.

Therefore, the present finding forms the first positive breeding record of **Acrocephalus arundinaceus** the Eurasian Great Reed Warbler for Iraq.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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الخلاصه

تم التسجيل الاول لهازجة القصب الكبيرة **Acrocephalus arundinaceus** ووجدت آنها تتكاثر فى العراق ·